

# Brucellosis-free zone would manage disease

By KIM AND JIM BAKER

The Tribune guest opinion July 15 written by Rachel Kinkie about Gov. Schweitzer's proposal to create a "buffer zone" around Yellowstone Park contained several inaccuracies, and misses the point.

Gov. Schweitzer has proposed this zone to prevent the entire state from losing its brucellosis-free status. When the governor recently discussed this approach with Dr. John Clifford, chief veterinary officer and deputy administrator at USDA/APHIS, Dr. Clifford said that such a plan would be "better than the status quo."

The governor has proposed this zone to better manage disease near the park. He has not proposed that bison be allowed to roam in this zone, and has not proposed that producers inside this zone would automatically lose their brucellosis-free status, as claimed by Ms. Kinkie.

Instead, it would mean that cattle moving out of the area would face stricter testing protocols, which would be paid for by the federal government. It is also possible that USDA can provide for indemnification or insurance for producers inside the zone, so that if a herd tests positive there, the herd owner is not relegated

to arguing the value of his herd with USDA after the fact, as has recently occurred with the Morgan family near Bridger.

This stricter protocol would better protect producers inside the zone, and it would better protect the producers of 2.4 million head of cattle raised in the rest of the state. Ultimately, it would provide the market

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— Kim and Jim Baker, Hot Springs-area ranchers

with assurances that Montana is taking every step possible to ensure that indeed all of its cattle are brucellosis-free.

Gov. Schweitzer has suggested that the zone could be up to 50 miles from the park, but also that it could

be substantially smaller — say, 20 or 30 miles — based upon geography, waterways, roads, wildlife corridors and other sensible boundaries. Additionally, the protocol could be made to go into effect only upon discovery of another infected herd.

More than two years ago, the governor pointed out the flaws of the current Interagency Bison Management Plan. As its name suggests, the plan deals only with bison management and not with the disease, brucellosis. It does not address the elk that range farther and are much likelier to transmit brucellosis to cattle than bison, as occurred in both Wyoming and Idaho. The

plan discusses brucellosis eradication, but provides no directives or tools to do so, and it certainly doesn't protect Montana from loss of its brucellosis-free status.

I remind Ms. Kinkie that this problem was not created by the governor. Brucellosis in the Yellowstone area is a federal problem that spills into Montana because both the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior have shown little ability or willingness to address it.

Former governors proposed no new ideas, but over a year ago, Gov. Schweitzer asked both federal agencies to come together with real solutions. The response has not been overwhelming.

In the meantime, two significant events have occurred: Idaho lost its brucellosis-free status like Wyoming, and just as Gov. Schweitzer warned, a Montana herd contracted the disease. In other words, Montana has lost its "mulligan." With the discovery of another infected herd, the entire state of Montana will lose its status.

Do we wait until that happens, or do we proactively plan for a sub-region, or "buffer zone" to protect all of Montana's producers — inside the zone and out?

Readers may be surprised to learn that both North Dakota and Kansas have already effectively "regionalized" Montana by adopting stricter protocols for cattle shipped from certain areas of the state.

They may also be surprised

to learn that both Wyoming and Idaho have already adopted this sub-region concept near the park, in order to demonstrate the more stringent management necessary to regain their status.

The difference is that they created their zones after the fact. Unfortunately, every producer in both states first had to suffer the consequences of losing disease-free status.

I am thankful that the governor knows we can do better. He is not willing to accept the same fate. Montana can have the benefit of being proactive.

Many folks in the agricultural community agree. Members of the Montana Cattlemen's Association, the Montana Stockgrowers Association and the Montana Farm Bureau have expressed their interest in a proactive approach.

They know that for the good of the entire cattle industry, stringent disease control measures are necessary, whether for brucellosis, tuberculosis, vesicular stomatitis, or thrichomoniasis.

Other sectors in agriculture regulate their industry in the same rigorous manner. Producers of seed potatoes, nursery stock, cherries, weed-free forage, honey bees, mint, sod, and various feeds, seeds and fertilizer products have all agreed to protect their industries with quarantines, zones, and specialized control measures — all for the good of the whole.

Jim and Kim Baker ranch in the Hot Springs area.